

“Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!” Amen.

Jacob is a long way from home and there is still a long way to go. Displaced, and on the run from fractured relationships within his family, he stops to sleep for the night, lays his head on a rock, and has a vision. He sees angels ascending and descending from a staircase leading to heaven and hears God’s voice. In this moment Jacob realizes that God is in this unlikely place and marvels that even this desolate wilderness land is the house of God.

“Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!”

Surely God is always with us, but we don’t always recognize or remember that wherever we go.

No matter how far or desolate or unfamiliar, we are living in the house of God, because all of creation is the house of the Lord, and that includes each one of us.

Today, we are celebrating our church’s namesake: St James, who is also the patron saint of pilgrims, because he left what was familiar to follow Jesus. He also found God in unlikely and unexpected places, making his whole life like a pilgrimage.

Rainer Maria Rilke, who you may realize is one of my favorite poets from quoting him in a previous sermon, gives me deeper insight into what may have motivated James to take these great risks in setting out into the unknown. Rilke says that God speaks to each of us saying:

“You, sent out beyond your recall,
Go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.
Flare up like a flame
And make big shadows I can move in
Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror
Just keep going. No feeling is final.
Don’t let yourself lose me...”

I can hear the lines of this poem in James’ story...When James met Jesus, he was doing his

ordinary day job of fishing. Jesus approached him and said, “come follow me!” And immediately, James left his boat and his father and embarked on the great pilgrimage of following Jesus, a pilgrimage that would take him to the limits of his own longing, and from which there would be no recall, or no return, to his former way of life. Over the next three years James discovered God moving in the world, flaring up like a flame, and no doubt, igniting the light inside of him too.

James witnessed Jesus healing people in mind and body and spirit, he encountered the beauty of Jesus’ radical way of love, he also encountered the terror of Jesus’ crucifixion.

But he kept going, to create even bigger shadows for God to move in. While in death and resurrection Jesus had returned to the Father, James’ earthly pilgrimage was not yet done.

So, James decided to set out once again, this time to share Jesus’ way of love with people in Spain. And after James’ also terrifying death of martyrdom, he became the patron saint of Spain and of pilgrims.

For centuries, all the way to the present day, pilgrims from all over the world have traveled to Spain to follow the way of St James, or the Camino de Santiago. Some of you here today may have traveled on this path. Pilgrims, just like us, leave their work and loved ones and ordinary lives to undergo a journey that facilitates an inner transformation. Like James, these pilgrims say yes to Jesus’ invitation to follow him, and then travel far distances, motivated by their own longing to know and see God. Inevitably, these pilgrims will also encounter what the poet Rilke calls beauty and terror. If you have ever been on a pilgrimage, or even spent extended time in solitude, you know that the longer you go, the more space you are given to reflect on your own internal landscape, full of God’s beautiful light as well as your own terrifying shadows.

Our shadows are those hidden places that are inside each of us, aspects of our character that we

don't like and want to deny, and that are easier to ignore or to project onto others, until you have nothing but the road before you and your own company. But in walking with Jesus, the pilgrim learns to welcome their inner light and their inner shadow, they discover that even in those shadowy, desolate, wilderness places, inside of their own minds and hearts, God is present.

The pilgrim explores the limits of who they are, so that they can know, with certainty, that no matter what they find out about themselves they too are an embodiment of God's love, or as Jacob said: "Surely, the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!"

The pilgrim learns that no feeling is final, no experience is conclusive, and they keep going, even in the hard parts, one step in front of the other, letting Jesus show them the way to be found by God, over and over again, in the dark and in the light, on this road, and on every road that is awaiting them at home.

And so we are reminded today, on St James Day, that there is no place inside of us that is outside of God's love, there is nowhere in the world we can go to lose God's presence. There is no shadow that cannot be illuminated by God's light, and there is nowhere in creation too desolate for God to dwell.

As the psalmist says,
"You trace my journeys and my resting-places
And are acquainted with all my ways...
Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I climb up to heaven, you are there;
If I make the grave my bed, you are there also.
If I take the wings of the morning
And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
Even there your hand will lead me
And your right hand hold me fast."

We are all on an earthly pilgrimage, guided by the courageous path laid by all the pilgrims before us: Israel's forefather Jacob, Jesus' beloved disciple James, pilgrims throughout the centuries who have walked on the Camino de Santiago, all the ordinary

saints who have been a part of this church. And as we courageously walk along our path with Jesus we can take heart that God is present in every single thing we experience, no matter how beautiful or terrifying. Nothing that is within us or outside of us is beyond God's love, because all of creation is the house of the Lord, and that includes each one of us.

May you marvel again and again with every step on the path of your earthly pilgrimage that God is in you, and God is being made known to you in all of creation. Surely the Lord is in this place - what a wonder and joy to know this!

Amen.